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SUBJECT: NEW MINISTERS ADDED TO HASINA'S CABINET

NEW CABINET FACES

11. (U) In a surprise move, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina named six more state ministers on January 24, bringing the number of people in her Cabinet to 38. All of the new ministers are lawyers and four are new to public office. All six were active in campaigning for Hasina's release from prison last year, demonstrating that loyalty to her remains the key factor in becoming a senior government official. The cabinet expansion also appeared intended to lighten some of the load on Hasina, by allowing her to shed several less important portfolios.

APPOINTMENTS HIGHLIGHT IMPORTANCE OF CERTAIN ISSUES

12. (SBU) The new State Minister for Energy and Mineral Resources is Shamsul Haq and the new State Minister for Religious Affairs is Shahjahan Miah. Both appointments indicate Prime Minister Hasina's seriousness in tackling these issues at the outset of her tenure. The Religious Affairs portfolio has taken on increased importance in the wake of an ongoing dispute over the appointment of the Khatib (chief imam) at the National Mosque (septel). Other new state ministers are Adbul Mannan, Housing and Public Works; Motahar Hossain, Primary and Mass Education; Jahangir Kabir, Local Government and Rural Development; and Kamrul Islam, Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. As Prime Minister, Hasina has retained the portfolios for the Armed Forces Division, the Cabinet Division, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry Women and Children's Affairs. Some speculate Hasina's Cabinet will ultimately include more than 50 people.

CORRUPTION BAGGAGE?

13. (SBU) Prime Minister Hasina was jailed on graft allegations by the Caretaker Government, and at least one of the new state ministers also appears to have been in trouble. Jahangir Kabir, a former Awami League student leader, was on the Anti-Corruption Commission's list of graft suspects and disappeared shortly after the Caretaker Government started a crackdown on corruption in January 2007. He resurfaced only weeks ahead of the December 29 Parliamentary elections. With the unrest caused by Awami League student groups, having the former head of the party's youth front in the Cabinet should help Hasina keep control over potential trouble makers.

COMMENT

14. (SBU) With the addition of these novice ministers to her Cabinet, Prime Minister Hasina is continuing to snub Awami League stalwarts who failed to support her when she was in jail. While this tactic brings new faces to the government, she risks further alienating senior party members. Post will continue to gather information on Cabinet members. One interesting feature of the newly expanded Cabinet is the number of former leftists given Ministerial rank.
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